

*Despite the challenges associated with policing an aging population, there also are numerous benefits senior citizens offer to both their community and the police department.*

>> In Eddyville, there was an elderly man who lived in the housing district where the police department is situated who used to drive to the local gas station in the mornings for coffee and breakfast, but couldn't remember how to get home. Though he lived just a few blocks from the gas station, and drove there nearly every day, he routinely had to call law enforcement officers who would drive to the gas station and let him follow them back to his home.

"When I patrolled a lot, I would keep the forms to have them retested for their driver's license in my cruiser," Benton's Watwood said. "But then I started second thinking that because the ability to drive is their last freedom. It's a sad thing when they don't have family here and they rely on that vehicle to go get food."

Statistically, Benton used to be the No. 1, 3 and 9 places in the commonwealth for wrecks, and a lot of that was a factor of elderly, inattentive driving, he said.

Cadiz faces similar issues. A large percentage of the city's minor accidents involve individuals born before 1940, Cadiz Chief Hollis Alexander said.

"They don't need to be behind the wheel because they are a danger to themselves and other drivers," he said. "But as a

department, we have a problem sending in the paperwork to have them reevaluated (or retested) on their driving. It's almost like taking any last hope of life they have away from them.

"But you may just be worried about safety," he continued. "It's a safety issue for the whole community and themselves."

Alexander said they sometimes have younger community members that come into the department and say one of their loved ones really needs to have his or her license taken away, but they don't want him or her to be mad at them. They ask if the police department can do anything to help.

"They say, 'That's your job,' and sometimes we have to play the bad guy," he said. "There are a couple of people that I think respected me, but died mad at me because my name was on that line that had their license taken away."

"In the back of my mind I think, 'Should I have done that or not?'" he added. "But when I think about the law — yes, I should have, because it may have saved their life or someone else's."

#### 'A GREAT SOURCE'

Despite the challenges associated with policing an aging population, there also

are numerous benefits senior citizens offer to both their community and the police department.

"A lot of people are timid around the elderly just because they are elderly, but for a police department they are a great source of information," Eddyville's Dixon said.

"They watch," Eddyville's Green added. "They are home all the time and they pay attention to what's going on — who's seeing what neighbor, who's going where. ... Sometimes they know way too much."

The Benton police fully recognize the benefits of the elders in their community. Wanda Morris, one of the elderly women in their community first called on the police during the 2009 ice storm because she had trees that had fallen, blocking both her front and back entrances and she couldn't get out of her home. She said that within two minutes she had three cruisers in her driveway. To this day, to show her appreciation for them, she will bake pecan pies for the officers at the department.

"They did for me, so I do for them," Morris said. "When they get into their cruisers they are risking their lives for us. I feel like they are my boys."

"She's a good citizen to have," Benton Capt. Jeromy Hicks said. "She says she's blind, but she knows what all the neighbors are doing and when. When we talk to her, she'll say, 'So and so is having extra company,' and she lives in one of those neighborhoods where we probably need eyes there watching some of her neighbors. We have a lot of those (kind of citizens) throughout our community and it is an extra help."

Not only are seniors eager to talk about what is going on around them, Watwood said, they also don't hesitate to let the police department know what they think the department needs to focus on or how it can improve in areas.

"Senior citizens are a huge part of this community," he said. "We value their input."

In Hickman County, input from seniors has led to the development of a neighborhood watch program. The elderly in the county began asking for neighborhood

► Benton resident, Wanda Morris, bakes pecan pies for her local first responders to express her gratitude for the great service they provide her. In turn, Morris also provides local law enforcement with valuable information on potentially criminal behavior of some of her neighbors.

According to U. S. Census Bureau, the overall population for the United States increased by 9.7 percent from 2000 to 2010. However, there were two groups that experienced the largest growth: Ages 45 to 64 grew by 31.5 percent — the large growth in this age group is primarily due to the aging of the Baby Boom population. Ages 65 and older grew by 15.1 percent ■

PHOTOS BY JIM ROBERTSON